

How *Does* Sanctification Work? (Part 1)



by DAVID POWLISON

When the risen Jesus gave final instructions to his disciples, he commissioned them to make more disciples (Matt 28:18–20). In other words, they were to serve the processes of *sanctification*: the birth and growth of new people with a new way of life. Perhaps describing his ministry goal as sanctification sounds surprising. We often hear Jesus' words as a call for personal evangelism, church planting, and world missions, with conversion as the desired result. But conversion is the first step in a long salvation, initially from sin's penalty, gradually from sin's power, and ultimately from sin's presence. It is the birth that leads to a lifetime of growing up into Jesus' image. Sanctification is discipleship into his way of life.

What is his way of life? Jesus is the man of faith who lives within the psalms, depending on mercies. He is the man of wisdom who lives out the proverbs, fearing the LORD. He is the man of righteousness who simply loves God and neighbors. He is the man of redeeming mercies who embodies Exodus 34:6–7 and Numbers 6:24–26. He is the servant of the LORD who lays down his life for others. And Jesus called his followers to do everything that helps others to follow him.

This article is the first of a two-part series on sanctification. We will drill down into key aspects of *how* growth in grace actually works, and thus how ministry works to promote growth. I will alternate between personal stories and exposition. Typically, the Christian life is either portrayed in a personal story or discussed exegetically and theologically. Both have their place, but ideally they come hand in hand—as they do in the Bible! Exegetical discussion and theological formulation can lose touch with the concreteness of both Scripture and human experience. Testimony can come unhinged

from biblical teaching, presuming that experience is self-interpreting and offers incontrovertible proof for what may be questionable views. The Bible weaves stories and interpretation, and I hope that my attempt to do likewise will prove faithful to the message and the method of Scripture, and will prove helpful.

My first story captures events so homely as to be almost unremarkable. This sort of experience is familiar to innumerable Christians who find the Word of God coming to life. But, like antibiotics healing bronchitis, something seemingly mundane appears almost miraculous when you think about it.

God Meets Us with His Promises

This morning my wife Nan and I were each feeling mildly overwhelmed by the pressures of life. The family had succumbed to various combinations of flu, bronchitis, pneumonia, and head colds over Christmas. A week later, both of us still felt half-sick and weary. On top of this, we are pressed by a weight of concern for an elderly loved one who faces intractable, deteriorating health problems. Nan faces a swarm of decisions and projects arising from a kitchen renovation, and I face snowdrifts of overdue grading, correspondence, and writing projects. The net effect? We were both beset with that most endemic of human disorders: a nameless mash compounded of stress, distraction, preoccupation with responsibilities, ambient anxiety, incipient irritability, and complaint. Neither of us entered the day as a flourishing garden of love, joy, peace, or patience.

We needed sanctifying this morning—as we do every morning.

And God met us with gifts of his Word and Spirit. He refreshed us, giving us what we needed. How? What brought renewal? We happened to be reading a passage from the further reaches of Deuteronomy:

The LORD found Jacob in a desert land.
 In the howling waste of the wilderness,
 he encircled him, he cared for him,
 he kept him as the apple of his eye.
 Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,
 that flutters over its young,
 spreading out its wings,
 catching them,
 bearing them on its pinions,
 the LORD alone guided him.
 —Deuteronomy 32:10–12

What happened? The LORD wrote these words on our hearts, as he promises to do (Jer 31:33). Here in a suburb of Philadelphia, on a day in early January 2013, the Holy Spirit took hold of things written down long ago. He clarified our minds, reawakened our faith, and animated our obedience. What happened pointedly illustrates how these

words in Deuteronomy were “written down for *our* instruction” (Rom 15:4; 1 Cor 10:11).

Nan put her immediate response this way: “When you feel like a castaway who needs to be found and rescued, to be treated as ‘the apple of his eye’ means the world to me.” She perked up. Her prayers and plans for the day came to life. She made good choices through her day.

Both Scripture and personal testimony teach us that there is no single formula for the kinds of problems that call for sanctification.

My response was similar. That image of God’s people in the desert resonated metaphorically and literally. It connected my sense of immediate pressures to a vivid metaphor. It also evoked experiences of hiking through California’s Anza-Borrego Desert in 115° heat during the 1980s. Similarly, the image of being encircled with protective care, like an eagle fluttering over its nest, resonated with me. The LORD encircles, hovers over, and carries his beloved people—I am one of his. Troubles, temptations, and our God came together. Like Nan, I went into my day with a clearer sense of purpose, a more focused mind, and more attentiveness to others.

That day, in a small way, the LORD changed how we lived. He comforted our hearts and established us in today’s version of “every good work and word” (2 Thess 2:16–17). We needed sanctifying, and the Spirit sanctified us.

It was a textbook example of one of the innumerable ways God speaks and works. This time, he surprised us. I’ve never been struck by this particular passage. Though I’ve no doubt read it many times, it formed no part of conscious Bible knowledge. These particular promises and metaphors had never “popped” for either of us. Were there thematic similarities with how God’s hand, and Scripture, and life experience intersect on other days? Certainly. But this was a fresh encounter with a passage.

I am convinced that our understanding of the process of the Christian life is greatly enriched by considering multiple, mundane examples, both in Scripture and in lives-lived. The pages that follow will consider *how* God changes people. The actual unfolding of progressive sanctification is no theoretical topic. One interesting characteristic is that all Christians already have at least some first-hand experience. Every Christian can say: “*This* was key in helping *me* when I struggled with *that* in *those* circumstances.” The stories are so varied!¹

¹ I have been greatly helped by reading thoughtful reflections from several thousand students who have detailed the truths and the people that most influenced their growth in grace.

But first-hand experience also presents a danger. It is easy to extrapolate your own experience into a general rule: “*This* must be the key for *everyone*.” Both Scripture and personal testimony teach us that there is no single formula for the kinds of problems that call for sanctification. There is no single formula for the kinds of change that sanctification produces. There is no single formula for the truths and other factors that produce change. Multiple stories help, because they make you realize that not everyone is like you. Are there common denominators? Yes. But to become a general rule, the underlying patterns must be of the sort that adapt well and flexibly to a multiplicity of cases. I will seek to do justice to both the variety and the commonality.

This article does not arise in a vacuum. The backdrop is a popular view that teaches that Christian growth is essentially and continually a matter of digging more deeply into how God forgives and accepts us:

You are sanctified by remembering and believing afresh that you are justified by what Jesus did on the cross for you.

Is that true? I think the Bible’s answer to this pastoral and practical question is straightforward: sometimes Yes, often No. Here is a metaphor. Scripture portrays sanctification in a range of colors and shades. There are reds, yellows, and blues—with 16.8 million shades in between. So any monochromatic view of sanctification is like saying, “You are sanctified by the color red.” For some Christians, some of the time, amid some life struggles, to remember the color red—justification by Christ’s death—proves pivotal. For other Christians, at other times, facing other specific struggles, other colors prove pivotal.²

That is where we are going. I hope that you will be nourished and encouraged by the way we get there.

What *is* the Motivation for Sanctification?

How do we explain the dynamics of sanctification? This has been a controversial question throughout Christian history. The controversy is usually framed in exegetical and theological terms (buttressed with historical examples). What is the relationship

- between justification and sanctification?
- between law and gospel?
- between indicatives (what is) and imperatives (what is to be done)?
- between God’s grace and God’s commandments?
- between receptive faith and active works?
- between what the Spirit does and what you do?

² This particular teaching is my immediate case study, but my larger intention is to address any and all forms of reductionism.

These are important questions. Exegetical fidelity and theological clarity matter.

But I've also noticed that something important is rarely mentioned. Most discussions do not reckon adequately with how *practical theology* operates—both in the Bible (which *is* practical theology in action) and in people's stories. How do people actually change? How does ministry actually effect change?

When the debate is framed in formal theological terms, all Christians agree in broad strokes. Three things precede any process of progressive transformation.

- God must reconcile our fatally broken relationship with him.
- Jesus Christ must accomplish his redeeming work for us.
- The Holy Spirit must change our sinful human nature.³

Yes, and amen. We are saved from outside ourselves, and we are saved from ourselves. We are Christians. So, of course, justification and forgiveness (along with many other things) precede and undergird sanctification. Grace (which takes many forms) precedes and undergirds obedience. The Spirit (who does and says many things) precedes and undergirds our efforts. No one disagrees at this level, because such generalizations are the rudiments of Christian faith.⁴

But the burning question remains: *how* are disciples made? This cannot be answered in broad strokes of theological formulation. It is a practical theology question, a ministry question, a life-lived question. Could the sole key to sanctification be to continually revisit how our broken relationship with God was reconciled by the work of Jesus? A vast Bible, centuries of pastoral experience, and innumerable testimonies bear joint witness that there is a lot more to it. When practical and pastoral implications are deduced from a sweeping theological generalization, and then buttressed with a single-stranded personal testimony, important things are swept under the table.

When we look back into the stories and details of Scripture, and when we look out into the variety of life stories and pastoral experiences, we see a “manyness” that defies reductionism, a “pointedness” that defies tidy abstraction. This morning, Nan and I were changed by hearing the LORD say, “I pursue my people in the desert, and I care for them like an eagle with its nestlings.” No doubt, many complementary doctrines explain, nuance, complement, fulfill, and abstract the words in Deuteronomy 32:10–12. The entirety of Christian faith operates in the deep structure, so we could justly say that “justification by faith in the death of Christ for our sins” undergirds

³ Of course, Christians significantly differ over how the details work! How do we rightly and helpfully express the categories, priorities, ordering, emphases, wording, and definitions? I have my views, but for the purposes of this article, it is enough to assert the areas of broad agreement.

⁴ Similarly, everyone also agrees—in broad strokes—that three kinds of things will culminate the process of transformation. Jesus Christ finishes his work by returning as King; our relationship with God becomes face-to-face; our human nature is perfected in love. What God began, he finishes. Progressive sanctification is about how we live in between God's laying the cornerstone and setting the capstone.

how this passage comes true. But if I had to pick a more immediate doctrinal underpinning, I'd point to "God's electing, pursuing love for his people," or perhaps "God's sovereign purposes working all things for good." But none of this doctrinal infrastructure was key to our sanctification moment on that day. A graphic metaphor met us: the eagle flew down and dwelt among us, caring for us, hovering over us, bearing us on his pinions.

Ministry "unbalances" truth for the sake of relevance; theology "rebalances" truth for the sake of comprehensiveness.

What then is the relationship between theological infrastructure and how disciple-making works? How is a graphic metaphor, for example, related to a doctrinal summary that tries to capture its meaning? How can we think about progressive sanctification in a way that generates ministry traction? Here is my core premise: *Ministry "unbalances" truth for the sake of relevance; theology "rebalances" truth for the sake of comprehensiveness.*⁵

The first half of that premise might sound odd at first, but this is what it means. *The task in any ministry moment is to choose, emphasize, and "unbalance" truth for the sake of relevant application to particular persons and situations.* You can't say everything all at once—and you shouldn't try. Say one relevant thing at a time. Deuteronomy 32:10–12 says one true thing in one particular way, and leaves a thousand complementary truths unsaid. But it was all we needed and all we could handle at that moment. When Jesus talks with people, he is astonishingly concrete, direct, specific. He is not comprehensive or abstract. This is because the Gospels capture a series of ministry moments in which Jesus gives people what they need and can handle. By saying one thing, not everything, he is always challenging, always life-rearranging, always nourishing those who are listening.

Jesus' own example is part of how we know that "sanctification by remembering Christ's substitutionary death" cannot be the beating heart of all sanctification. He continually makes disciples by all that he does and says along the way up to—and even in the midst of—his final act of atoning sacrifice. Here is an example. I have been profoundly affected by pondering the seven things Jesus says as he is dying. His actual experience while making atonement demonstrates the fundamental extraversions of candid faith and personalized love. Amid intense suffering, when everything about

⁵ I am indebted to Rev. James Petty for this way of putting it.

torturous dying invites a whirlpool of introversion and self-preoccupation, Jesus cries out to Father and cares for the people around him. We watch and hear. We learn from our master's way of dying what it means to be his disciple. And I say with a glad heart that I have had the privilege of knowing wise Christians who were trusting, caring, thoughtful, and hopeful even as they were hurting and dying. I've seen the image of Jesus remade in our flesh. That is our sanctification. That is our discipleship.

Practical ministry focuses on one truth out of many for the sake of relevance. But the second half of the core premise is equally important. *The task of theological reflection is to abstract, generalize, and "rebalance" truth for the sake of comprehensiveness.* Balance—whether topical (systematic theology) or narrativial (biblical theology)—protects us from exaggerating, ignoring, or overgeneralizing. Part of why “sanctification by revisiting justification” cannot be the entire truth is because every Christian doctrine and every part of the story also matters. The Bible is a vast and deep Word, not a pamphlet. For example, systematic theology reminds us to notice not only the “work” of Jesus Christ culminating in death and resurrection, but also to notice his “person.” Every paragraph in the Gospels is only explicable because this man is fully God and this God is fully a man. This has implications for maturing our faith and love. For one thing, absolute authority and utter sympathy become one flesh. He claims our loyalty, commands our attention, elicits our humility. He exposes us, delights us, masters us. We love this Jesus. Yes, we are discipled into Christ by understanding the meaning of the atonement. We are also sanctified by attending to how he treats the woman at the well. There, we watch how a human being loves well, how he asks questions, how he listens, how he responds to questions, how he specifically addresses both her spoken concerns and her unspoken sins and sorrows, how he disagrees constructively. We are overhearing the image of God in action. We are learning from what we hear.

In order to actually minister to people, you need wise selectivity, while bearing in mind the fullest possible repertoire of options from which to choose. You do not build a house with only one tool in your toolbox when God gives us a truck-load of tools. But you do use your tools one at a time, the right tool for the right job.

As an aside, I think this premise helps explain why “balanced” teaching often seems general, non-specific, and even dull, while “unbalanced” application sounds pointed, relevant, and scintillating. Teaching that is only balanced is “pointless.” It discusses topics, rather than speaking to and with people about matters of urgent concern. Ministry electrifies when it connects something to someone, rather than trying to say everything to no one in particular. Theologians and teachers, beware!

The delicate relationship between the whole truth that orients and particular truths that scintillate also helps explain how “unbalanced” teaching can go bad. There are good reasons why not every Christian is impressed with the one truth that may

have revolutionized *your* life. That one partial truth may have really helped you, and it may be drawing a particular kind of person to your ministry. But when one truth morphs into The Truth—the whole truth—it becomes an axe to grind. It promises a panacea, a “cure all.” As this happens, it slides in the direction of a magic formula, a “secret” to be discovered, not the plain, simple wisdom of God. A word that really helps some kinds of people can prove unhelpful—even misleading and destructive—to people who need one of the other kinds of help that God gives.

Am I saying that pointing a person back to the justification of sinners could actually be pastorally hurtful? Yes. If what you need to know is “I am with you right now. I am your refuge in this affliction,” then you may well go hungry if you are given “I died for your sins once and for all.” You might beat up on yourself for your lack of faith, or you might go cold to God because a message that claimed it would help you doesn’t seem to touch your need for help. In the long run, a single truth harped on will disappoint even its devotees. In another season of life, facing a different struggle, they, too, will need the other kinds of help. What once sizzled becomes boring, a repetitive pat answer that no longer delivers. Preachers and counselors, beware!

The story with which I opened this essay was “unbalanced.” On that particular day, Nan and I stumbled into God’s presence with low expectations, with only a reading plan that told us to open the Bible to a particular place. The Lord surprised us with evocative promises and ignited faith’s imagination. We obeyed in practical ways because our imaginations caught fire. That morning we were sanctified by overarching *promises* that prompted actions.

But is that how it always works?

God Meets Us with His Commands

I am now writing three days later. These past three days have been marked by an entirely different dynamic. Each morning I’ve been sanctified by intentionally taking specific *commands* to heart. One familiar sentence has been my daily companion in the Holy Spirit’s discipling work:

The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. (1 Tim 1:5)

Here, Paul describes the goal of all ministry. This is what holiness looks like. This is what sanctification aims to become. This transformation of both behavior and motive is entirely rooted in sure promises of ongoing blessing: “Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord” (1 Tim 1:2). But taken for what it actually says, Paul’s charge is “law” in the best and foundational sense of the word. Law is good. God’s moral law describes love, expressing Jesus’ intimate purpose in working with us to set us free. The moral law is not only a standard against which sinners fail, driving us to need our Savior. God is love, and his law reveals both the

image in which he created us and the image in which he is recreating us. Law is about loving well. It is not cold, legalistic, threatening, and impersonal. It is warm, humane, desirable, personal. The law describes how full humanness operates when walking free. It pictures how wisdom perceives and acts. It casts a vision for what we are becoming under the gentle, firm hand of our Savior's grace. Why has this law of Christ proved so nourishing to me and had such a noticeable impact during these past three days?

Here is a bit of backstory that captures how this rich command has been touching my life. For starters, I am *not* a morning person—cobwebs are an understatement. I laugh aloud each time I read the description of the contrast between two of my favorite literary characters, Stephen Maturin and Jack Aubrey: “Stephen was still stupid from heavy sleep. . . . He was a frowzy, unwashed object, his wits not yet gathered into an orderly troop, whereas Jack was in the full tide of daily life.”⁶ I can identify with that frowzy stupidity, that mind adrift in a disorderly maze. I can identify with that contrast between my slow start and certain friends who arise buoyantly awake and girded for action at 5:30 each morning. But God does not leave me frowzy. In each of the past three mornings, as I have consciously reflected on God's will for me expressed in 1 Timothy 1:5, that disorderly troop has gradually fallen into line and marched into the day on a rising tide of gladness and purpose.

Paul charges me to consider others because I am awake to God. Holiness in my relationships with others is the bottom line. Sanctification means pointedly, freely, genuinely loving other people. Lord, help me to stop, to care, to notice, to listen, to express candid appreciation, to share my life. And he helps. This goal has marked my conscious intentions when I've participated in meetings, when I've chatted with coworkers in the hallway, when I've conversed in face-to-face counseling, when I've come home to Nan. These words have helped me to treat others well. Being indifferent, or opinionated, or avoidant, or preoccupied comes easy. But it is a bit of holiness when I am happy to see someone, when I ask a question and mean it, when I listen attentively, when I genuinely affirm, when I push back candidly and constructively. These words from Paul's letter have marked my work on this article. Father, help me to write constructively, according to your people's need of the moment. May these words give grace.

Loving other people comes from somewhere: “a pure heart, and a good conscience, and a sincere faith.” Caring for others (horizontal sanctification) arises from reorientation to God (vertical sanctification). I have been consciously reflecting and seeking the three ways this command describes our reorientation to God. *A pure heart*. Father, make me less divided by competing loyalties and agendas, by unruly

⁶ Patrick O'Brian, *The Surgeon's Mate* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 282.

desires and anxieties. Make me love you wholly. *A good conscience*. Lord, attune my conscience so that I weigh all things the way you weigh them. Make my conscience alive and active. Imbue my conscience with Christ's merciful, redeeming purposes. *A sincere faith*. Holy Spirit, make me simple, candid, and resilient. Make me trust you in need, in gratitude, in joy, in dependence.

When we ask anything according to his will, he hears us and we will be sanctified.

Be Careful How You Generalize About Sanctification

In the past week, on one day Nan and I were surprised by gifts of sheer promise that address the experience of feeling harassed, overwhelmed, and alone. The Spirit's sanctifying word came as a pungently evocative Old Testament metaphor, as an indicative, as gospel (in the large sense of the word), as a gift of grace feeding faith. The obedience that followed arose spontaneously, uncalled for within the passage itself.

Then on other days the Spirit's sanctifying word came as I intentionally pondered a command. I fed on imperatives. The imperatives portray what Jesus is like. This law of Christ and law of love guided my intercession, my aspiration, and my efforts. This apostolic word called me to the energetic obedience of faith and the energetic obedience of love—premised on, dependent on, and seeking the grace, mercy, and peace of God and Christ.

The work of Christ on the cross—so foundational theologically—was entirely *implicit* throughout this week, neither mentioned in these Scriptures, nor said aloud, nor consciously pondered. It was not absent—the foundation of a house is always foundational. When there are cracks in the foundation, when the house is sagging, you work directly on the foundation. But other times you simply live in a well-furnished house.

Throughout my Christian life, there have been—and I trust there will be—many other words that prove life-rearranging, day-rearranging, and moment-rearranging. (And remember, here we are only discussing the Word and Spirit aspect of sanctification. Many other things affect our sanctification—the input and example of other people; participation in worship and sacrament; noticing God's creation; experiencing how he works within suffering; learning candid prayer; and so forth.) Neither of my two specific examples from this past week touches on everyone or every situation. What speaks to a deceitful serial adulterer? To a child transfixed by the beauty of falling snow? To a woman facing a diagnosis of metastasized ovarian cancer? To a repentant adulterer torn by guilt? To a businesswoman facing an ethical dilemma in her workplace? To a newly married, virginal couple about to have sexual relations for the first time? To a depressed elderly man for whom the spark of life went out 20 years ago when his wife died? And even that list only names a few categories of persons—and individuals *are* individuals, not categories. What will be the timely

word for *me* tomorrow morning? For *you*? For the next person you talk with?

Ministry, Scripture, and the Spirit speak variously. This is also why any two wise, godly friends will speak differently into your life, even when addressing the same situation. Organic unity (balance) and infinite adaptability (unbalance) characterize the wisdom that sanctifies us. There is no formula or pat answer. When two friends say the same thing, or when you say the same thing to every struggler, it is probably a pat answer.

Overstatement always underdelivers in the long run. Reductionism promises too much with too little.

My stories provide several core samples of the pastoral application of Scripture unto sanctification. But what if I attempted to draw *theological* conclusions from my experience? In the first case, I might conclude and teach, “All we need are the wide-ranging promises of God. Simply believe in God’s initiating and intervening care. Obedience will flow spontaneously. The effort and struggle in the Christian life is the struggle to remember that God watches over those he loves.” But if I formed my theology from the second case, I might conclude and teach, “God’s grace lays the foundation once for all. Now we must focus all our efforts on loving God and neighbor. We need to think hard, plan well, and make every effort to discipline ourselves in practical obedience.” In either case, I would have extrapolated a plausible but faulty generalization from an experience that had been personally significant. Each formulation (almost) seems to fit. But inexorably, the first generalization drifts toward pietism. And inexorably, the second generalization drifts toward moralism. And neither of these generalizations address someone who needs to know how Christ reproves a high-handed evildoer; or a person in anguish, who needs to know that God is a safe place; or those who are weary, and need to trust that one day this struggle with sin and sorrow will end and all things will be made new.

Sometimes We *are* Directly Sanctified by Remembering Our Justification

This article has been interacting with a message about sanctification that intends good and has good in it. Here are some of the catchphrases that claim to describe the essential dynamic of sanctification: “Meditate on your justification”; “Remember the gospel”; “Contemplate the cross”; “Preach the gospel to yourself”; “Realize you are accepted by Christ’s performance for you.” Each of these exhortations can be applied in a way that is very helpful on some days and in some situations. But when timely

“unbalancing” becomes repetitively and assertively unbalanced, such phrases become misleading both pastorally and personally. Other helpful, needful things get drowned out. Standing on their own, these statements lead to the following generalizations.

- Sanctification essentially involves the activity of remembering, believing, and resting on justification. Rehearsal of Jesus’ substitutionary death is the key dynamic driving our sanctification.
- Self-salvation through our efforts is the sin of sins. The attempt at self-justification-through-performance is the deepest, most persistent, and most significant problem hindering and necessitating sanctification.
- The effort and struggle of the Christian life is about the hard work of remembering that we are justified and accepted by what Christ has done. Sanctification is not about our behavior, but about clinging to Christ’s mercy.

These generalizations are simply not true. The Bible explicitly shows and tells something different. People’s stories show and tell something different. As selective, pastoral applications in certain cases and situations, each of these statements contains something true and helpful. But stated as theological generalizations about the universal dynamics of the Christian life, each is overstated and reductionistic. Overstatement always underdelivers in the long run. Reductionism promises too much with too little. When theory trumps reality, reality bites back.

But when your theory and practice comport with reality, reality gets reshaped. You grow as wise and flexible as the Scriptures, which have a knack for adapting to the messy complexities and idiosyncrasies of reality. Scripture is willing to boldly speak one unbalanced bit of relevant truth into the appropriate situation, and then willing to speak in an entirely different way in the next paragraph or in a different situation. If we restate the previous overstatements more modestly, as one possible pastoral directive among many potentially helpful pastoral words, the grain of truth in them clearly emerges.

- *Sometimes* you are sanctified by pointedly remembering that God justifies you on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, atoning sacrifice, and resurrection.
- Basing your relationship with God on your performance is *one common problem* that both calls for sanctification and hinders sanctification.
- *Sometimes* it is a struggle to remember that you are justified by Christ’s work—and it is worth struggling to get that foundation clear.

Do you see how different this list is from the previous one? Plain, simple, accurate understatement has a way of delivering more than you expect in the long run. You can honestly ask yourself, “Does this describe me or not?” Your honest answer will be either a yes or a no.

I want to zero in on the times when the answer is yes. Are we changed by knowing that we are justified by faith? Yes and amen. To consciously remember and take to heart that you are justified and accepted by God because of what Jesus Christ has done for you makes a big difference in your Christian life. In some counseling and discipleship situations, it is *exactly* the message that needs to be featured. This truth is theologically foundational to being a Christian, to being forgiven, to being made right with God, to having the courage to be candid about our sins (one of the foundational transformations of the sanctification process). It is elementary—not in the modern sense of being as easy as ABC, but in the old sense of being basic, fundamental, essential, constitutive. Consciousness of this truth not only works to change people at the inception of Christian faith. The New Testament letters are written to Christians. As an aspect of apostolic pastoral care unto sanctification, they often remind God's people of what Christ did for us. It is no surprise that I have known many true Christians who only gradually came to understand the significance of what Christ did on the cross. Growing in such knowledge was a part of their sanctification, their growing assurance and confidence, their understanding of sinfulness, their gratitude. Growth in those things was often slow and hard-won.

What are some ways that consciously grasping and resting upon justification by faith directly ministers pastorally? This truth often powerfully affects people who are oriented toward their own performance. It comforts those disturbed by the sting of their failures. It disturbs those who are comfortable and self-satisfied in their successes. Anxiety and depression might seem like the opposite of pride and self-confidence, but they can originate in the same underlying compulsion.

Justification by faith is comforting. Men and women who doubt that they are acceptable and accepted, who struggle with believing that God could ever love them, who feel that they always fall short, who slink in shame around God, are foundationally helped. Listen, learn, and trust that God willingly and truly reconciles us to himself through Christ. He raises up those crushed by failure, self-condemnation, guilt, and shame. His mercies touch our need.

Justification by faith is also disturbing. Men and women who are overly self-confident; who try to prove themselves to God, others, and themselves by their goodness; who try to save the world by their efforts; or who busy themselves building a resumé and crafting an identity are humbled. God humbles those who are proud, self-confident, and self-righteous. He teaches us to need his mercies.

So whether you think you are too bad or think you are good enough, it makes a difference to know that justification before God comes by faith in Christ and what he has done. Such faith is an empty hand reaching to receive life. Here is one biblical description of how he has done it:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. (Rom 8:31–34)

Take this to heart. Don't ever forget. If you feel *unworthy*, and all these things are true, then the door to the Father stands wide open. If you think you *are* worthy, then because these things are true, this is the only door to the Father. He means it when he says, "Come to me." So, whatever your struggle, take him at his word.

So far so good. But now notice something significant about the pastoral purpose of Romans 8:18–39. Paul openly states his reasons for mentioning God's justifying mercies in 8:31–34. He is not even thinking about performance-oriented people. Self-salvation efforts, our sins, and placing personal faith in Christ's atoning work for forgiveness are not in view.⁷ The direct application in *this* discussion of justification serves people who face hardship, weakness, and hostility. They are tempted to doubt God's love, to feel abandoned by God, to feel threatened by "the sufferings of this present time." Romans 8:31–34 mentions that God has already justified us by Christ's death as one way to give hope and comfort to sufferers, not to remind anxious sinners or obsessive strivers. The takeaway is not, "You can get off that performance treadmill—God does not condemn you for your sins." The takeaway is, "However hard life gets, nothing and no one has power to destroy you and separate you from the love of God." The second half of Romans 8 sanctifies you when earthly life is a vale of weakness, groaning, and tears.

In this pastoral context justification by faith serves as one subpoint in a long chain of subpoints aiming to make a far larger point: *God is for you*. "God is your justifier" is one of a cascade of ways that God demonstrates his essential attitude toward you. I will not unpack the dozen or more ways that Romans 8:18–39 reinforces his "I am for you." But notice how, just within Romans 8:31–34, "God is your justifier" joins hands with four other ways he shows how he loves you.

- God did not spare his very own Son, but gave him up for us. This is not repeating how and why forgiveness and justification were accomplished. It is showing the attitude and purpose that animated God to give his nearest, dearest, and best to us and for us. *He was for you*.
- God chose us to be his own—electing, possessive love. This points out that God freely sets his affection on his chosen people. *He was for you all along*.
- If God has already given us his own Son, then of course he will freely give

⁷ This doesn't invalidate the application I made in the previous paragraph. As pastoral work so often does, I made an application by implication and extension, rather than making the exact application that the text makes.

us every other good thing. This points to many other blessings, past, present, and future, that come in train with Christ (many of which are mentioned earlier in the extended context). *He is abundantly for you.*

- This Christ Jesus who died was also raised to life, and he continues to intercede on our behalf. This points to Christ's current ongoing work of redeeming love. *He is still for you.*

God does not condemn us, but loves us—and he is the one who decides. Many interlocking, mutually-reinforcing, soul-nourishing truths serve a larger promise. In the midst of painful circumstances, don't lose heart, because *every* blessing (including justification) works unto your sanctification, your faith, your obedience, and your hope.

God Meets Us with What We Need—Whatever That Is

Let me again take a personal moment, this time to make a general comment. I will describe some of the backdrop for the two discrete incidents described earlier. As I reflect back over decades, I am struck by the fact that I have never been particularly changed by consciously trying to remind myself of justification or adoption. Those doctrines have not been in the spotlight of sanctification moments. But I know *many* Christians—including my Nan—for whom the process of learning and relearning these truths has had, and continues to have, a crucial, life-rearranging significance. Every Christian's life story plays somewhat different music—variations in lyrics, melody, harmony, key, tempo, and instrumentation. Handel's "Messiah" and "Blessed Be Your Name" by Matt and Beth Redman are both in the repertoire of Christian faith. Redemption in Christ plays out in every story. This is how it should be. Pastoral ministry—both preaching and counseling—should relish the variety. We serve a King who makes no two snowflakes alike, and his thoughts regarding each individual are more numerous than snowflakes in a blizzard. It would be most odd if he said the exact same thing to change every one of us. It would contradict who he is and who we are.

Why has conscious revisiting of justification and adoption played a relatively minor role in my Christian life? It is no doubt significant that I was dramatically converted in my mid-20s as a godless, anti-Christian adult. I lived in such diehard opposition to Christian faith that Christ arranged a Damascus Road conversion. One effect has been that God's merciful love has been a core operating assumption from the inception of my Christian life. For reasons intrinsic to my particular story, I have never doubted that I am saved from outside myself. I have simply *known* that God freely chooses to call us from the kingdom of death into the kingdom of life. It has been self-evident that the Spirit is the life-giver, and we are reborn from above. I have never doubted that God forgives and justifies us by Jesus' active obedience in self-giving love, by his passive obedience in suffering death in our place, by his

vindication in resurrection to indestructible life. It has been a given that the Father adopts us as beloved children in the Beloved Son. It has been a working assumption that the Spirit works in us every step of the way until God shall complete what he has begun. Of course, knowing these things has been greatly deepened, enriched, and made articulate over the years, to my incalculable benefit. (I could not have written this paragraph thirty-five years ago. My understanding and gratitude have grown.) But the foundational saving realities have been more a tacit given than an explicit acquisition.

Not everyone is like me.

Given the way that God has chosen to work in my life, it is perhaps not surprising that I have not struggled with trying to prove myself to him by my efforts, diligence, and achievements. My characteristic flesh has never been goal-and-achievement-oriented, either before or since becoming a Christian. So, for example, I have never felt obligated to take daily time to read Scripture and pray. I have never felt closer to God because of performing that duty, nor felt guilty for not doing it. I seek God daily because I need to. When I don't meet God personally, thoughtfully and humbly, I suffer the consequences. It's analogous to forgetting to eat. I suffer because I am hungry, not because I feel guilty. "I'm hungry and I need to eat" is *different* from "I really should have eaten, and I failed again." The conscious drama, effort, and struggle of my sanctification has not turned on performance-drivenness. It has most often turned on other issues. Here are two crucibles of my sanctification.

First, I identify with the indifference, laziness, and self-centeredness of the current "Whatever" generation, having been well-nurtured and well-practiced in the version of those sins endemic to the 1960s. I have had to learn to value caring for others and working to accomplish goals. I have never needed deliverance from obsessive striving after relationships and achievement. Instead, the Holy Spirit set out to teach me to value relationships and achievement.

Second, I identify with the discouragement and anxiety of people who suffer, who experience life's fragility, losses, failures, and threats. As a young adult, several immediate encounters with death and dying played a profound role in my eventual conversion to Christian faith. And from middle-age on, God has used acute and chronic health problems to teach me 2 Corinthians 1:2–11: we are able to help others because we have been helped. I have had weakness thrust upon me. I have had to learn to trust God when I am weak. Christ's sympathetic entry into our experience of weakness—yet another aspect of his suffering and death operating simultaneously with the work of atonement (Hebrews 4:14–5:9)—has played a significant role in my sanctification. No surprise, Paul's story in 2 Corinthians 12 and a passel of psalms have repeatedly contributed to my growth in grace

But I can also understand how it is that people whose characteristic flesh defaults to achievement, performance, and control are prone either to self-righteousness or depression. For them, the struggle to grasp the significance of justification by Jesus' performance may frequently come front and center. I hope they can understand those of us whose characteristic flesh defaults to other forms of fallenness, and for whom other truths of Scripture have greater impact.

Here's the takeaway. I dare not extrapolate my exact experience of God's mercies to everyone else.

Learning how God is essentially *for* you and *with* you is foundational for every Christian. And there are so many different ways he shows it! Even the fact that he disciplines, reproves, and chastises us (Heb 12:5–14) demonstrates his fatherly love and hands-on commitment to pursue our welfare and sanctification. God gets our attention when life doesn't go well, or when the conscience rightly stings. He keeps working with us—using both comfort and reproof in their proper place—so that we learn to “strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.” Does that contradict the incalculable flood of fatherly mercies expressed in Psalm 103? No. His chastisement is one more purposeful mercy, and the Christian life dwells within all the riches of mercy.

It is not surprising that God's way of working idiosyncratically, not formulaically, touches the most intimate, vulnerable acts of relationship with him. When I feel the sting of conscience, and directly confess and repent of my sins, I do not usually remind myself of justification by the work of Christ. Exhortations to “Remember justification, sonship, the atonement, the cross” sound abstract to me, and offer little relational traction. What powerfully helps me is how Psalm 25:11's direct speech brings together a candid sense of need with the immediacy of God's person and promises: “For your name's sake, pardon my iniquities for they are very great.” Similarly, Psalm 32, Psalm 51, and the prayers of confession in historic Christian liturgy give helpful words and actions to express how my need for mercy meets the Father of all mercies.

Here's the takeaway. I dare not extrapolate my exact experience of God's mercies to everyone else. Similarly, those who have had their Christian life revolutionized by awakening to the significance of justification by faith dare not extrapolate that to everyone else. One pattern of Christ's working (even a pattern common to many people) should not overshadow all the other patterns. A rightly

“unbalanced” message is fresh, refreshing, joyous, full of song, life-transforming. But eventually, if it is oversold, it becomes a one-string harp, played by one finger, sounding one note. It drones. Scripture and the Holy Spirit play a 47-string concert harp, using all ten fingers, and sounding all the notes of human experience. Wise ministry, like growth in wisdom, means learning to play on all the strings, not harping on one note.

I am certain that those who teach “sanctification by revisiting justification” have heard that message as a new and joyous song that sanctifies them. May Jesus Christ be praised! Perhaps God has been liberating them from a ponderous Christianity that seemed to breed a weight of failure to perform, of failure to live up to expectations, of failure to accomplish all that needs doing, and of judgmentalism toward others who fail. May the God of mercies be praised! But let’s not forget to learn all the other sweet and joyous songs. And let’s learn the darker notes of lamentation and the blues. Let’s learn the call to action in work songs and marching music. And let’s learn everything else that comports with and nourishes life in Christ.

* * *

The second part of this article⁸ will further explore the dynamics by which we are sanctified, disciplined, and changed. We will look at a number of significant biblical teachings that push against the tendency toward reductionism in approaching sanctification:

- “The Cross” is bigger than Christ’s death for our sins.
- “The Gospel” is bigger than the cross.
- “The Word of God” is bigger than the gospel.

Since all that God has revealed is unto our sanctification (Deut 29:29), then every part of Scripture is intended to motivate transformation of our lives into Christ’s image.

We will also address several specific aspects of the view that sanctification is chiefly a matter of revisiting justification.

- Is sanctification essentially the activity of remembering and rebelieving that Jesus died for your sins?
- Is self-justification by your own performance the chief problem that sanctification must deal with?
- When the Bible says to “make every effort,” is the hard work chiefly the struggle to remember and believe again that we are saved by the achievement of our Savior?

In each case, I will say No, and will seek to widen both our personal approach to sanctification and the scope of ministry to others.

⁸ Part 2 is planned for *JBC* 27:2, Lord willing.

The Journal of Biblical Counseling
(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:
Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation
1803 East Willow Grove Avenue
Glenside, PA 19038
www.ccef.org

Copyright © 2013 CCEF
*The Journal of Biblical Counseling is a publication
of the Christian Counseling & Educational
Foundation (CCEF). All rights reserved.*

*For information on permission to copy or distribute
JBC articles go to: www.ccef.org/make-a-request*